

The Image

International Conference 2-3 December 2010, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

The Identity of the Empire: the Italian colonial experience in the design of places

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The State has always promoted a strong image of itself through architecture and facilities, especially in the context of the colonies. Usually in the overseas dominion, a common language has been applied to governmental buildings and infrastructures in order to make evident and recognisable the symbolic role of those artefacts.

The Italian experience in this field is ambiguous and unique: a clear image of the State has not been promoted in the colonies, where vernacular elements, both local or Europeans, alternates with modernist solutions. Even the fascist regime, more keen to promote the idea of a strong and authoritarian power, has alternated the use of stereotypical images to avant-garde positions. Architects and Engineers had a higher degree of freedom in the overseas provinces than in mainland Italy, producing an eclectic environment which, in its own way, is a true representation of the Italian culture.

The Italian colonial experience has been for a long time neglected and not fully investigated, but an enquiry in its outcomes can reveal how a recognisable image in global terms does not necessarily involve a global language. In the areas where the Italian control was more consolidated, the colonisers had the chance to build entire cities with complex and astonishing architectures. In those parts of the empire, such as in Ethiopia, where the domination was more recent and precarious, the main legacy is the road and infrastructure network. In both experiences is possible to read the ambiguity between tradition and innovation, in both experiences is possible to recognise a clear image of the Italian State.